

Supporting Societies' Needs: a Model Framework for Developing a Policy for Libraries

National public library policy in Finland - a case study

prepared by:

Barbro Wigell-Ryynänen

Counsellor for Library Affairs

Ministry of Education and Culture

Finland

Preface

The attached case study has been developed as part of a six-month research project leading to the development of a model framework for library policy for which the following key activities were included:

- desk research leading to preparation of a background paper on the history and current best practice in preparation of library policy¹;
- development of case studies to illustrate forward-thinking/innovative national or sub sector library policy²;
- development of a draft model library policy framework;
- facilitation of consultative meetings and workshops to discuss and finalize documents;
- publication of a model framework³.

¹ NIDA *Supporting Societies' Needs: a Model Framework for Developing a Policy for Libraries: Part 1: Background* , 10pp, 2011

² NIDA *Case Studies of best practice in library policy: Colombia, Finland, Namibia, New Zealand*, 2011

³ NIDA *Model Framework for Library Policy*, 2011

National public library policy in Finland - a case study

Finnish public libraries are used diligently. The library network is extensive, 840 public libraries and 154 mobile libraries serve a population of 5.3 million. There is an average of 18 loans, 10 physical library visits and more than 10 visits on library web sites per capita each year. More than 40% of the entire population has a library card.

Legislation and national public library strategies are prerequisites for the continuous development of library services throughout the whole country. Public libraries are maintained by the municipalities in accordance with the Library Act and state subsidies cover 40% of total expenditure. Legislation is obligatory; all actors in the field should have the necessary prerequisites to conform. Strategies and policies define objectives and goals and how to proceed to achieve the wanted goals. Policies should be committed to but they are not obligatory. Preparing and presenting policies in close dialogue with all actors in the library field assures unanimous commitment.

Legislation

The first Library Act came into force in 1929. The citizens' right to services of quality regardless of domicile or financial standing was emphasized from the very beginning. Later amendments of the Act have been signals of societal change and new paradigms.

The Library Act of 1961 came into force with the emergence of the affluent society and brought the idea of the family library as well as substantial state subsidies for upkeep of services, for constructing new library buildings and for acquisition of mobile libraries. Provincial libraries were established to provide a network of well-resourced city libraries that support the smaller libraries in the area.

The Library Act of 1998 is strongly linked to the Knowledge Society. Public libraries had been developing virtual services since 1995, heavily supported by the state. Since 1996, state grants have been allocated annually for developing content and user-friendly services on the web. Annual grants for reading promotion are channeled through the Provincial State Offices.

According to the Library Act users shall have access to library and information professionals, and to continually renewed library material and equipment. Library services are free of charge. The Library Decree defines the role of the Central library for public libraries and the 18 provincial libraries, as well as the assignments of the library experts at the State Provincial Offices. The Decree also establishes the qualification requirements for the staff.

The Finnish Library Policy Programme

From 2001 the Finnish Library Policy programme identified challenges arising in the civil Information Society and suggested concrete solutions to them. The programme strongly emphasised that as certain assignments were given to public libraries through the Library Act, corresponding resources had to be made available. Measures had to be taken to gear up library funding, personnel resources and technological capacity. Recommendations were given for acquisition of materials, for number of personnel and Internet terminals, with an indication of the service level that should be achievable for all municipalities.

The Library Strategy 2010, a policy for access to knowledge and culture

was issued in 2003 as one of the first European library strategies. The strategy presented visions and objectives to ensure access to knowledge and culture, outlining the responsibilities of local authorities and the state. The importance of skilled staff and the specific role of libraries in the knowledge society was presented:

"A first prerequisite for developing information provision for all is that skilled staff be available; then, an up-to-date standardised technological infrastructure must be in place for all types of libraries. After that, the emphasis falls on developing web-services that correspond to the citizens' need for information."

There was parliamentary election the following year (2004) and the library Strategy was referred to in the Government platform.

The following quotation from the Strategy links nicely to UNESCO's Information for All-Programme report, *Living information*, 2006, which aims to bring together two essential concepts - access to information and the use of information. *Living Information* also refers to information that helps people enhance their own lives.

"During the next few years the significance of the library will increase as a place for learning and experiences, as a conveyor of diverse knowledge and culture with a view to mastering and organizing information according to user needs, as a gateway to information and to electronic communication within the public administration, and as part of a learning society that practises lifelong learning, because the significance of the web and electronic communication is brought out only when the contents are being used, and ultimately by how well users have the chance and ability to utilise the information in their lives."

(Library Strategy 2010)

The Library Development Program 2006 - 2010 – the library as an integrated service centre for rural and urban areas

from 2006 carried out the action plan of the *Library Strategy 2010*. It also responded to the proposal made in a national policy paper for developing the regions to transform public libraries in rural areas into cultural, information and action centres. The driving forces behind the Programme were new user needs and lifestyles, new possibilities created by technologies as well as the aim to deepen regional cooperation. It recognized that smaller farms are not necessarily very profitable any longer and that farmers need to learn about new livelihoods, for instance organic farming or countryside-tourism. On the other hand, urban dwellers want to spend more time in their summer houses and new technology makes it possible for them to do remote work and distance studies. At the moment approximately 5% of the Finnish working population are telecommuters - there would be capacity for much more. This is also an important environmental issue.

Many rural libraries are small and not very well resourced. The Programme stressed the importance of a skilled library staff and comprehensive collections and services.

The Ministry of Education and Culture finances centrally produced web-services from FinElib, the National Electronic Library, and from the trilingual, diverse services of libraries.fi, homepage of all Finnish public libraries, in order to level out regional differences in the service level.

The Finnish Library Policy 2015

from 2009 is a national course of action, aiming at political visibility and secured financial support for public libraries. The Policy brings forth the library as a basic service, implementing, along with comprehensive education, basic cultural rights, which the Constitution guarantees for each and every citizen.

For the individual, the big challenge is to be able to find reliable and adequate information for the current life situation, and to be able to use the information for her or his own benefit. Knowledge provision of the individual is the most important objective in increasing the quality of library and information services.

Today's library users expect versatile collections and services, premises suitable for reading, studying and distance learning, for finding information and for carrying out electronic communication. The library is a common space, users benefit from the wireless environment, often bringing their own laptops, and spending time in the premises. To know the opportunities available, to be able to find adequate information and to be able to use it are some of the greatest challenges for citizens in the Knowledge Society. The quality of online information varies, and the demand for a strong expertise is growing. There is an increasing need for personal guidance, for teaching information and media literacy. Libraries are expected to mediate relevant information and knowledge and to create quality online services in a constantly growing flood of web-content of extremely varying quality.

For the first time, libraries are clearly placed in a situation where they have to compete with other actors in the field of information provision, and they also have to compete for people's time.

It is important to stay visible, the physical premises should be centrally situated and welcoming, the visibility on the web and in the social networks is just as important.

Future success must be earned. To succeed, libraries must produce added value, something that others are not able to offer. Google's mission: "to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful", might sound alarmingly familiar to librarians, but libraries have a trump card: they serve the individual here and now, in the current life-situation, in dialogue with the user, whether it is a question of face to face service or an Ask-a-librarian service on the web.

Focusing on expertise and emphasizing quality

The Library Policy 2015 emphasizes that libraries can answer future challenges only by focusing on expertise and emphasizing quality. Competence requirements for library staff were tightened again from the beginning of 2010 in order to secure expertise and services of quality in all public libraries. Studies in the library and information field are available in all levels of education after comprehensive education. A higher university degree is required for library directors.

With the drafting of the Library Policy 2015 programme, it became clear that the previous quality recommendations and goals for public libraries had to be revised. In the spring of 2009, the Ministry of Education and Culture appointed a working group to renew the quality recommendations. The workgroup consisted of representatives from public libraries and state administration. The basis for the work was to review the recommendations for quality assessment from the library policy programme from 2001. These recommendations have since been partially modified and have been used widely as a tool for local, regional and national evaluation.

The workgroup drew up a presentation of a national set of criteria for quality for public library operations, which observes local and regional conditions and which generate tools for libraries' self-evaluation. The report drafts a presentation on how the social impact of public libraries can be measured on a national scale and makes proposals about new key figures to take into use in the public libraries' statistics database.

Cooperation is essential

All Finnish public libraries are part of some regional library network with joint library systems and catalogues on the web. Cooperation and joint resources enable small libraries to also carry out continuous development and updating of services.

There are many actors in the national library and information field. The National Library is a powerful resource, serving public libraries not only with electronic material but also with the current construction of the national catalogue on the web and interfaces for the National Digital Library. The Consortium for Public Libraries is quite influential, with representation from both small and big libraries. The Finnish Library Association and the big library of the capital, Helsinki City Library, also the Central library for public libraries, cooperate with the Ministry of Education and Culture in national and international enterprises.

The School Library Association, the academic libraries and also the special libraries have been very interested in public library programmes and strategies and, for instance, have invited the Ministry to present them at their conferences. However, no similar policy and strategy documents exist for the other library sectors.

Networking and cooperating at all levels is how public libraries in Finland can succeed.